

SOCIAL SIDE OF THE CIRCUS.

FAMILY TIES STRONG AMONG THE SHOW PEOPLE.

Husbands and Wives and Children Who Are All Performers—Good Conduct Strictly Enforced—Sharp Cast Lines in the World Under Canvas—Domestic Scenes.

By TONY HAMILTON.

Copied, 1937, by R. P. Hamilton.

The devoted wife of the late James A. Bailey travelled with him every summer and looked after his comfort. She had a beautiful home in New York and plenty of money; yet she kept house for him, with a colored cook, in his private car on route.

Mr. Bailey was the only woman in the show proper who had no direct part in the show itself. With such a vast necessary outfit there is never any room for deadheads; not for one. Wives of performers frequently adopt some role in order to travel with their husbands, but it must be one which is necessary or useful to the show—such as driving a chariot, caring for properties, etc.

The daughter of the tattooed couple became a freak, known as "the moss haired girl" so as to be with her parents. Mrs. White was costumed, her daughter, Emma, was haute école rider, and the latter's husband was property man. Mr. White had trained dogs. This family of four started a third generation while en route, with a girl born to the young couple in Germany and who was born in France. The children were put out under nurses—and the parents started for the United States after the five years tour they gathered up their progeny to find that the girl understood only German and the boy only French. The parents knew only English.

The charming young mother, who, with two brief intermissions, had appeared in the ring all of that time, was not able to understand her own children and could not be understood by them.

Not infrequently more than two members of the same family belong to the show; husband, wife, daughter or son. Mrs. Dockrill belonged to the show when her little daughter was in the carrying act, and her husband was equestrian director.

There are more married couples in the circus than in any other. Sometimes they play in teams; sometimes it is a whole family. Sometimes the husband is a clown, while his wife is a trapeze artist or the husband is at the horizontal bars and his wife does the slack wire; or the wife drives a chariot, while the husband is employed in the administrative department, and so on.

There is a sympathetic chord common to the whole family of performers, and this is danger. Any dangerous feat is always the subject of general anxiety. A man may be painted and dressed as a clown, but he can't very well feel funny when his wife or daughter is poised high in the air preparatory to a swinging catch or somersault which may be her last act.

They have often witnessed this tender solicitude which others saw not, and have noted the deep drawn breath of relief when the danger was passed. There are many such anxious faces at every performance, consequent upon the family relation; but dangerous feats have the sympathy of all without exception. Even the unformed ring attendants look pleased when the thing is over; while the father, mother, husband, wife, brother, sister, not in the act, having watched it breathlessly from some secluded corner, silently thank God that the time which is sure to come sooner or later has not yet arrived.

When you see these couples and families huddled together in the shade of the wagons, or in remote cool corners of the big tents, between performances, the women sewing, knitting, or crocheting, the men gossiping, smoking, or snoozing, it would require a stretch of the imagination for you to picture them in tights and tinsel on horseback, on the high trapeze, or doing the bars—they look so homelike, domestic and commonplace.

On Sundays they enjoy a grand rest, writing letters, reading, and doing only necessary sewing and darning. I know of a man who used to put in all his spare time painting and sketching. He had a small easel set in the back of his trunk, and in the very whirl of the coming and going often put in touches with his brush on some picture in hand.

Husband and wife often occupy places near each other. Though the canvas which separates the dressing rooms is between them they can pass their time to each other beneath the curtain and enjoy each other's society during the performance.

They must perform lead a regular and moral existence. The nature of their calling, which demands quick eye and steady hand, compels the strictest observance of the rules of strenuous life. They are even prone to practise in the dressing rooms between hard work some new feat, some fresh muscular exercise.

Now you will see why the morals of the circus personnel of to-day are superior. Do you suppose for an instant that all of these husbands and wives and fathers and daughters are likely to tolerate the presence among them of disreputable women and immoral men? Not much! The atmosphere itself soon be made too hot for them.

There is no place, no occasion, no companionship for them. If they are there they are on their good behavior. The great spectacles carried by the modern circus bring from fifty to five hundred women into the personnel. These women are, as a class, respectable and highly respected. They are present everywhere behind every bit of canvas about the tents, in the dressing rooms, at the eating tables—and this compromise enforces a certain consideration and a degree of decency of language and decorum of action rare among any other class of men.

The surroundings and supervisory care of these women are such that the most sensitive and refined young woman might travel with a circus from one end of the country to the other for a whole season with as absolute safety for her person, her mind and her morals as if she were attending any reputable boarding school.

She never passes out of the range of the watchful eye of the matron of her section, whether in dressing room, arena, or in the cars. She is marched from car to tents, from dressing room to meals and back to the car after the performance with a gentle, motherly but firm hand that knows no breach of duty.

Her life is too busy to leave room for discontent or chafing at restraint. There are no attractions for her, anyhow, in the dusty crowd of a village show day—no place to go, nothing to see. Her sole companionship must be found with her own sex, in her immediate and close circle, or with her husband, mother, father, brother or sister, who may be with her on the road.

It will surprise many doubtless when I say that in the circus personnel the domestic tie is stronger, the conjugal bond firmer and more apparent, than in other circles of life.

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